Rigging in Pakistani Election May Have "Unlawfully" Kept Candidates Out of Office: Suppressed Report

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On Thursday, we launched a fundraiser to help 29 vetted Palestinian journalists who are either evacuating from Gaza to another country, or being violently displaced from Gaza City to elsewhere in Gaza. In just two days, readers have kicked in more than $120,000 of our $150,000 goal. And technically, we're already hit the goal because one reader reached out directly yesterday to make a $30,000 gift. A huge thank you to him and everybody else who has given so far. Let's pretend that big contribution doesn't exist and see if we can hit the goal without it. All the money goes directly to these journalists and their families and if we raise more than we tried to, they can certainly use every penny of it.
GIVE TO THE GAZA JOURNALIST FUND

Election results on a television at a shop, a day after Pakistan's national elections in Lahore on February 9, 2024. Photo by ARIF ALI/AFP via Getty Images.

By Murtaza Hussain, Ryan Grim, and Waqas Ahmed

An international body tasked with monitoring elections and democratic institutions quietly suppressed a report critical of Pakistan's election in February of last year. Drop Site News has obtained a leaked copy of the Commonwealth of Nations report and is publishing it in full. The election, which kept Pakistan's current military-backed government in power, was marred by widespread fraud that flagrantly overturned the clear will of voters, who came out in droves for the party of imprisoned former Prime Minister Imran Khan.

In February 2024, the Commonwealth Secretariat sent a 13-member Elections Observer Group (EOG) to Pakistan to monitor its elections, which is standard practice for the organization. While the EOG, headed by the former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan, gave a generally positive statement in the immediate aftermath of the elections, its official report was highly critical of the elections, accusing the government of actions that violated "fundamental political rights, including freedom of association, assembly and expression."

The Secretariat informally shared the damning report with the Pakistani government soon after it was submitted to the Secretary General, after which Pakistan asked the Commonwealth to suppress it, according to the source. Astonishingly, the then-Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, Patricia Scotland, complied, burying one of the most detailed reports highlighting the widespread electoral fraud that the Pakistani military used to hang onto power. **The full report is here.**

The report by the Commonwealth Secretariat should have been published just days after the February 2024 election under typical circumstances. Yet to this day it is absent from the Commonwealth's website—the only time in its 70-year history it has failed to publish an elections observer report on any country.

The report was leaked to Drop Site News by a source frustrated that the Commonwealth had not released it despite promising to do so over a year ago. The source hoped that leaking the report would cause the Commonwealth Secretariat to reflect on whether the organization's complicity in the government of Pakistan's cover-up is consistent with the organization's commitment to the democratic process.

Following multiple requests for comment, the Commonwealth told Drop Site in a statement that, "The Pakistan COG Report, as well as other reports, are scheduled for

release by the end of this month." The organization did not respond to questions about why the report had not been published in the year and a half since the election, or about its correspondence with the Pakistani government. Delaying release of the report until the end of this month would serve to keep it hidden until after the upcoming United Nations General Assembly meeting. The Pakistani Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Pakistani Embassy in D.C. did not respond to requests for comment.

In the weeks following the election, the Pakistani military regime lobbied the organization not to highlight election monitoring results that would prove embarrassing to the new government and erode their legitimacy, suggesting it would cause political unrest. The Commonwealth's decision to comply shielded an unpopular and undemocratic government from international embarrassment and further erosion of legitimacy.

The Pakistani military came to power after former Prime Minister Imran Khan was removed in a no-confidence vote organized by the military in 2022. His removal from power came amid private pressure from U.S. diplomats, who, leaked documents later revealed, threatened that bilateral ties between the two countries would be seriously damaged if Khan were to remain in power. Just prior to his removal, Khan had also publicly called out UK and EU diplomats for pressuring him to take a side on the Ukraine war. Khan's stance on the Ukraine war had made him disliked by the EU, the UK, and the U.S.—all of whom eventually played a role in ensuring that Khan did not stay in power. Khan was later imprisoned on corruption charges widely viewed as political. His supporters have faced violence, official bans from political participation, and even, following the vote, extradition from foreign countries at the request of the military-backed regime.

Heading into the February 2024 election, Khan's party was under heavy pressure, but managed to generate a massive public turnout despite this suppression. Yet the integrity of the 2024 count was called into question almost immediately after images and videos showing widespread manipulation at polling sites began circulating on Pakistan social media on election night. Compounding the problem for the military, television broadcasts reported massive leads for Khan's party before going dark, only to return many hours later with an inexplicable and unexplained reversal of fortunes for the military-backed parties.

Despite the fact that early vote counts indicated a landslide victory for candidates aligned with Khan, the banned Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaaf (PTI) party saw their polling leads rapidly reversed in favor of pro-military candidates, who went on to form a government.

While the outcome of the vote has long been challenged by Khan's supporters, and even some of his critics, the unpublished Commonwealth report is the most extensive on-the-ground documentation of what actually took place during the vote. While couched in diplomatic language, the report raises serious questions about the conduct and integrity of the 2024 election. The report notes that limitations enacted by the government and the judiciary before, during, and after the vote were "felt most acutely by PTI and its supporters," adding that these decisions "consistently limited" the party's ability to fairly contest the election.

"When looked at in isolation, some—though not all—of the arguments advanced by key institutions in support of their actions appear somewhat justifiable. Yet, collectively, it could not go unnoticed that these decisions consistently limited one party's ability to contest the election on a level playing field," noted the EOG head Goodluck Jonathan in the suppressed report.

"Unlawfully Returned"

In addition to throttling Pakistan's once-vibrant media, the military regime placed severe limitations on PTI's ability to campaign before the election, including a formal ban on the party itself that forced its members to run as independent candidates, and even banned the use of its electoral symbols. PTI candidates also faced violence and frequent threats. When these measures failed to prevent massive turnout by PTI supporters on election day, more direct means were allegedly used to alter the vote. The Commonwealth report points to both deliberate communication disruptions and outright rigging by the military to undermine the vote, including internet and cellphone disruptions and potential manipulation of vote counts to undermine support for Khan's party.

“On election day, the failure of the digital results transmission due to the shutdown of cellular services significantly reduced the transparency of the process,” the report noted. “The Group noted a number of discrepancies between polling station results forms and tabulated results forms at the constituency level, which may have resulted in some candidates being unlawfully returned.” (“Returned” means “declared a winner” in context of the language used in the report.)

While generally using language that congratulated Pakistani election monitors over their conduct during the vote, the Commonwealth election observers simultaneously pointed to extreme suppression of PTI members and supporters, including detentions and raids aimed at restricting their participation in the election and even harming them personally. “The Group received multiple reports of PTI members and supporters being arrested, detained and undergoing unexplained periods of disappearance, and of PTI offices and PTI members’ homes being closed or raided. These occurrences affected the ability of parties and candidates to exercise their fundamental constitutional rights of freedom of association and assembly.”

The report added that the widespread internet disruptions that took place during the campaign, and which PTI supporters viewed as deliberate attempts to prevent their campaign from operating, did appear to “coincide with one political party’s online campaign and fundraising events.”

While raising grave concerns over the fairness of the 2024 election, the report did praise increased youth and female turnout, despite evidently finding that their votes were not counted with accuracy.

New Rules of Engagement

Since the election, Pakistan has devolved into a state of accelerating authoritarianism, with crackdowns on the press and civil society institutions. Since the vote, physical violence, arbitrary detention, and harassment has targeted not just members of the PTI, but Khan himself while in custody, and even members of his extended family.

The Commonwealth elections observer group report was one of the two major reports compiled by ostensibly neutral international observers, with the other being an EU Experts Mission report. That report was also never published. This is the first time in the history of foreign observation of Pakistani democracy that both the Commonwealth and the EU have refused to publish their reports. (That report has not yet been leaked to Drop Site, but if you work at the EU group group and have access to it, send it to tips@dropsitenews.com.)

Just like the Commonwealth, the EU also sent an Election Expert Mission to Pakistan to monitor the 2024 elections. In 2018, when the EU sent a similar but larger mission to Pakistan, it published an election report critical of Khan's government. However, this time the EU sent a much smaller mission at the end of which no report was published.

There were multiple attempts by EU citizens to get ahold of the report under freedom of information laws but the EU's diplomatic body—the European External Action Service (EEAS)—has firmly resisted all attempts to make the report public. The case eventually ended up in the European Ombudsman's office, where the EU argued that "disclosure of the report would undermine the public interest as regards international relations." During the hearing the EEAS also argued that "even partial access would be negatively perceived by Pakistan and therefore undermine the EU's international relations," and therefore the report must not be released.

The EU Ombudsman did not respond to request for comment about their report.

Dr. Hussain Nadim, who is affiliated with George Washington University, said European unease with Khan dates back to the start of the Ukraine war, when he rejected calls from Western envoys to supply weapons and publicly rebuked them at a rally after they pressed him in writing.

"Since then, both the EU and the UK have been comfortable with Pakistan Army's onslaught against democracy and Imran Khan's illegal incarceration as long as the military regime was compliant on the Ukraine war front," Nadim said. "That is the most likely reason they have not rushed to release their election reports and believe publishing them now could destabilize Pakistan's politics in a way that might facilitate Khan's comeback."

However, he said that “with the Ukraine war at its tail end, there would be less incentive to turn a blind eye on the state of democracy and human rights abuses in Pakistan.”

The suppression of the Commonwealth report comes as the organization continues to embrace a ruling Pakistani regime that its own observers accused of engaging in actions that “impinged on the credibility, transparency, and inclusiveness of the electoral process,” in that country. Pakistani foreign minister Ishaq Dar has made it a point to engage with, and even present gifts to, both the outgoing Commonwealth Secretary General Patricia Scotland as well as the incoming Shirly Botchway, with a frequency that many observers noted is unusual for a Pakistani foreign minister.

While praising Pakistan as a country with “enormous” democratic potential, the unpublished EOG report took aim at the military control of Pakistani politics—a third rail in the country’s political system that has undermined democracy nearly since its founding. “For democracy to flourish in Pakistan, there must be a much clearer demarcation between military and civilian authority in line with the country’s Constitution and international law,” the report stated, adding, “Political parties and all organs of the state, including the military, must establish new rules of engagement that place the sanctity of independent democratic institutions and processes out of the bounds of political maneuverings.”